

Stray Feathers

An Unusual Visitor to Moreton Bay.—An unusual visitor to Queensland appeared about October 1953. While on station at the mouth of Moreton Bay, members of the ship's company of the pilot steamer *Matthew Flinders* were surprised to hear repeated calls from the sea around the ship. This continued at intervals for a couple of days. Shouted invitations to the owner of the voice to show itself resulted in a Little Penguin's circling close around the ship. A crab net was lowered, the Penguin swam in, and so was lifted aboard. It would not accept food offered but seemed content to stay aboard and rest. When it appeared uneasy the net was produced again and the bird lowered back to the sea. Captain Con Reilly says these visits became regular with the penguin calling for its 'lift' about 10 a.m. daily. It would rest on the ship until daylight next morning, when it would call for the net and so be lowered to the water—presumably to go off fishing.

This went on for a couple of months with the bird transferring per medium of its favourite crab net to the relief ship, *John Oaley*. After trying all spots the penguin chose the concrete floor in the bathroom as favourite—wood seemed least popular. The bird was inclined to peck at first but soon became tame. Swimming near the ship it seemed frightened of bonitos and sharks but ignored dolphins. On one occasion the ship was anchored eight or nine miles from the usual spot but the penguin found it and called to be lifted aboard as usual. The sequence was broken when a sick man had to be rushed back to port and a wooden ship, the *Captain Heath*, took over pilot duty for a short time.

These notes have been compiled from information kindly given by the above-mentioned ships' officers. We join in the hope that the penguin returned south to his kind and was not taken by one of the big sharks.—J. S. ROBERTSON, East Brisbane, Qld., 24/10/54.

Distribution of Inland Birds.—When reporting in the *Emu* (August 1954) the occurrence of a stray specimen of the Gilbert Whistler near Sydney, I observed incidentally that the species was distributed "throughout the interior of all mainland States". That remark was made in a moment of aberration, for, of course, *Pachycephala inornata* has never been recorded from Queensland. How far north the bird occurs in New South Wales has not been established, but, bearing in mind that more or less suitable areas occur in the vast western expanses of the State, it seems quite probable that this engaging whistler extends up to the latitude of Bourke. Indeed, I should not be surprised to learn in time of a pair or two being observed in south-western Queensland.

As to the farthest-south point reached by the species, I recorded in the *Emu* for 1916 (vol. 16, p. 37) its breeding occurrence in open-forest country near Maryborough, Vic., and I have since found it nesting in that locality on several occasions. From there it extends only a few miles to the south and south-west, being checked then by large areas of open country. Recently (October 2, 1954) I saw, near Maryborough, an almost-completed nest of a Gilbert Whistler built upon an old nest of a White-browed Babbler. Some days earlier a nest containing three newly-hatched young was seen near Wedderburn (about 60 miles north of Maryborough), and in the same district three members of the genus—the Gilbert, Golden, and Rufous Whistlers—were heard calling at the one time.

An even more interesting experience in the Wedderburn area was the sight of a pair of White-fronted Honeyeaters (*Gliciphila albifrons*) which were nesting in a shrub, at a height of about four feet, within a few yards of the nesting-bush of the Gilbert Whistlers. The neat little fibrous cup of the honeyeaters contained two eggs. This discovery extended the range of the species, as far as my experience goes, very considerably; for, previously, I had met the species only in the Wyperfeld National Park and in the dry country immediately south of Murrayville (see *Emu*, Nov. 1946), and this latest observation was made about 100 miles south-east of Wyperfeld. The spot was one from which mallee eucalypts had been cleared and replaced largely by small shrubs, and these, being in flower at the time, contained many nectar-loving birds, among them the White-eared, Tawny-crowned, Yellow-tufted, Brown-headed and Fuscous Honeyeaters. Incidentally, I was again much taken by the resonant chatter of the 'White-front' (so like that of the Reed-Warbler), and the impression recurred that this bird should not be placed in the genus *Gliciphila*, but in *Meliornis*.

Another mallee bird found nesting near Wedderburn was the Purple-backed Wren (*Malurus assimilis*)—a species unaccountably excluded from Victoria by both the R.A.O.U. Checklist and Cayley's *What Bird is that?*—and yet another was the Scrub-Robin (*Drymodes brunneopygia*). It was a pleasure to see again the sprightly form of the Scrub-Robin, and also a distinct pleasure to find one of its ground-based nests, with its curious 'dog-leg' fence. The nest contained a dark-coloured little nestling, the odd fact being that the Scrub-Robin is restricted to one egg to a clutch. Years ago (1941) Ray Littlejohns and I found this species nesting in the vicinity of Mount Arapiles (a few miles west of Horsham), so that the occurrence at Wedderburn, an area well east and slightly north of Arapiles, does not represent the bird's farthest-south point. Possibly, however, it is the most southerly point reached by the species in the

eastern part of its range. See also "Where 'Robins' Meet", by N. J. Favaloro, *Emu*, 53, 223, 1953.—A. H. CHISHOLM, Sydney, 27/10/54.

Scrub-Robin on Murray River Swamp.—During a survey of the water birds on the swamps in the Murray River valley, east of the town of Morgan, S.A., on October 24, 1954, I was astonished to hear the unmistakable call of a Southern Scrub-Robin (*Drymodes brunneopygia*) among lignum (*Muehlenbeckia cunninghamii*) on a patch of high land between two lagoons. By imitating the call and stalking the bird, I was able to obtain a very good view of it at extreme minimum range through 8 x 40 binoculars.

The bird was under observation for several minutes as it ran about among the lignum, and I am not sure that there were not two birds. So far as I can discover there is no previous record of the Southern Scrub-Robin inhabiting swamp land in any part of the Murray River valley.

Destruction of the natural habitat of the species by clearing of land, thinning of scrub by timber-cutting, and extinction of tall shrubs and undergrowth as the result of browsing by domestic livestock, especially during periods of prolonged drought, is slowly reducing the range of distribution of the species in South Australia. On the Mount Mary Plains it no longer occurs in some patches of scrub where twenty years ago two or three pairs of the birds could be found. These disruptive factors are almost certainly at work, in varying degrees, elsewhere in its general range of distribution.—E. F. BOEHM, Sutherlands, S.A., 25/10/54.

White Wing-bars of the Chestnut-crowned Babbler.—A plumage character that is quite common in birds, and frequently used in field identification, is the presence of white, or coloured, wing-bars or wing-patches. In the flight pattern of ducks, waders, etc., these are often quite prominent and frequently used in identifying closely-similar species. They are quite noticeable, for example, in the Black Swan (*Cygnus atratus*) and in smaller species such as sittellas and tree-creepers, but in most instances they become hidden when the wing is closed. The reverse to this rule I found apparent in my limited experience of the Chestnut-crowned Babbler (*Pomatostomus ruficeps*). In fact it is difficult to find a further similar instance in which the reverse to the usual rule occurs.

Before my acquaintance with the Chestnut-crowned Babbler in the field, I had the belief that, as the white wing-bars appear prominent in photographs and other illustrations, they would be even more so in flight. Therefore, when I observed a small party of babblers somewhere near Lake Little Hattah in 1951, and for a brief few seconds

saw the white wing-bars, I felt sure of identity. However, as I walked towards the birds they went farther away and I did not secure another view of them perched, but I was perplexed because I could not detect the wing-bars again whilst watching them in flight with field-glasses, and thought I must have been mistaken.

A few days later, at Mr. Roy Wheeler's suggestion, I visited another area where he had seen the species the previous day. The flock was still there and fairly good views were obtained, and once again I did not notice the whitish markings in flight. However, the noticeable timidity (a characteristic not evident with the two other species of babbler I had seen many times) was again apparent, and it was difficult to secure close views of them when perched. In an interesting brief article (*Emu*, vol. 38, p. 414), L. G. Chandler does not mention the eclipse of the wing-bars in flight but does refer to the shyness of the species.—A. R. MCGILL, Arncliffe, N.S.W., 18/7/54.

The Little Egret.—Of the three species of *Egretta* in Australia the Little Egret (*E. garzetta*) is undoubtedly the rarest. As far as is known the bill of the Australian race is black throughout the year. A single record to the contrary (*Emu*, vol. 33, p. 297) is probably erroneous. As the bill of the largest species (*E. alba*) is black occasionally during the breeding season (cf. *Emu*, vol. 33, p. 167) such a characteristic field guide for *E. garzetta* is not an infallible one. However, if it is seen with *alba*, when size comparison is most noticeable, bill coloration should make identity of the Little Egret fairly safe. If such a common swamp-haunting species as the White-faced Heron (*Notophojx novæ-hollandiæ*) is present recognition of *E. garzetta* is also reasonably easy as it is noticeably smaller than that bird.

My first observation of the Little Egret was near Moree in 1943, but as the birds there possessed the two long plumes from the nape identity was considerably simplified. In the Sydney district it ~~must be considered~~ as only an occasional visitor. Therefore, the observation of one at Pitt Town Lagoon on January 23, 1949, by Ron Boughtwood, John Fearnley, Ern Hoskin and myself, was quite unusual. It was feeding with *E. alba*, and the size disparity was most noticeable both on the ground and when in flight, as well as the black bill of the smaller bird. No breeding plumes were evident. A few weeks previously Norman Fearnley saw a similar bird, which could have been the same individual.

The only previous record for the Sydney area appears to be the specimen mentioned by A. J. North (*Handbook of Sydney*, Aust. Assn. Adv. Sci., 1898, p. 101): "*Ardea melanopus* Wagl.—Spotless Egret. Very rare. I have only

known this species to have been once obtained in the County. It was procured by Mr. J. A. Thorpe at Botany." North, for some unaccountable reason, omitted the species from his *Nests and Eggs* . . . , though eggs had been taken in 1898 and described by A. J. Campbell (*Nests and Eggs of Australian Birds*, 1901, p. 958) from S. W. Jackson's collection (cf. *Catalogue and Data of the Jacksonian Oological Collection*, 1907, p. 144)—A. R. MCGILL, Arncliffe, N.S.W., 18/7/54.

Black Kite near Sydney.—During the summer of 1951-52 a noticeable movement of the Black, or Fork-tailed, Kite (*Milvus migrans*) to southern Australia was noticeable. Usually it is a bird of the more northern parts of the Continent, where it occurs usually in large numbers and is a conspicuous bird of the inland parts. Various articles have appeared from different areas on the unusual irruption at that time. However, I have not seen a published account of recent observations of it in New South Wales, except its brief inclusion in World Bird Day lists from the Clarence River, and published in special issues by the Bird Observers Club, Melbourne, covering 1952 and 1953. Probably a small resident population occurs in the Clarence River valley.

During my trip to the Lake Hattah Camp in 1951 I first saw the Black Kite near Balranald. At the Camp I had an excellent observation of a flock of approximately twenty-two birds close to Lake Little Hattah on one occasion where they apparently had been attracted from around the area by a dead sheep. Because of that observation, where it was possible to secure a fairly satisfactory idea of field appearance, I had no hesitation in identifying a bird at Camden, about thirty-eight miles south-west of Sydney, six months later (April 25, 1954). I first saw it from the car whilst entering the town, and had close views of it immediately after for a minute or more, with field-glasses, until some Magpies (*Gymnorhina tibicen*) arrived menacingly and quickly drove it off. The mostly-unmarked blackish underparts, pointed wings, forked tail (only apparent when not widespread), size and "balancing" slow flight were all typical of the species.

A few weeks later (June 7) I saw a very similar bird near Narellan, three miles east of Camden, pursued by a Whistling Eagle (*Haliastur sphenurus*), but unfortunately on that occasion I was unable to observe the all-important tail pattern before the bird disappeared over a nearby patch of timber.

Mr. K. A. Hindwood has kindly obliged me with previous known Sydney occurrence information. The name of the Fork-tailed Kite appears in a manuscript list of the Birds of Dobroyde (near Sydney) compiled by E. P. Ramsay between the years 1859 and 1865. Ramsay remarks that

it was seen 'very rarely'. The list is in the possession of his son, J. S. P. Ramsay, of Woolwich, Sydney. A. J. North included the species, without comment, in his list of the birds found in the County of Cumberland (*Proc. Linn. Soc. N.S.W.*, ser. 2, vol. 3, pt. 4, 1889, p. 1773). In a subsequent list (*Handbook of Sydney*, Aust. Assn. Adv. Sci., 1898, p. 70) he remarked—"Several species included in a former list [1889] of the birds of the County of Cumberland are omitted in this paper. They are principally forms that . . . have not been observed of recent years, such as . . . *Milvus affinis* [= *migrans*]".

In the Australian Museum there is a skin of a Fork-tailed Kite, no. 0.23850, ♂, collected at Eastern Creek, some twenty-five miles west of Sydney; it is the specimen noted in the *Cat. Aust. Birds*, *Aust. Mus. Sydney*, 2nd edn., pts. 1-2, 1898, p. 41 (E. P. Ramsay and A. J. North), and also the one referred to by A. J. North (*Nests and Eggs of Birds Found Breeding in Australia and Tasmania*, vol. 3, pt. 3, 1911, p. 237) as having been obtained by George Masters. The date of collection of this specimen is not known, but Masters obtained other birds in the same or nearby localities in the 1860's and the 1870's. The skin in question was included in his bird collection purchased from his widow in 1912.—A. R. MCGILL, Arncliffe, N.S.W., 18/7/54.

Little Shearwater in Eastern Australia: a Third Record.
—In the course of a walk along Cronulla Beach on September 25, 1954, Mr. E. S. Thellefsen picked up the skeletal remains, with wings and tail still attached, of a Little Shearwater (*Puffinus assimilis*). The weather during the previous week had been unsettled, with strong winds, rain and rough seas from the south and south-east. It was anticipated that numbers of derelict sea birds would be washed up on the beach. However, the only species recorded, apart from the Little Shearwater, were several prions (wings and portions of bodies only), four dark shearwaters, *Puffinus* spp. (wings only for the most part), one immature Gannet (*Sula serrator*), and two albatrosses. One of the albatrosses (wings and part of body only) appeared to be the Black-browed Albatross (*Diomedea melanophris*); the other was the Shy Albatross (*D. cauta*), the head of which was missing.

The Little Shearwater has now been collected three times in eastern Australia. The first occasion was on April 10, 1942 (Serventy, D. L., *The Emu*, vol. 42, 1942, pp. 49-50), the second on December 3, 1949 (Hindwood, K. A., *The Emu*, vol. 49, 1950, pp. 291-2), and the most recent example on September 25, 1954; all were found on Cronulla Beach which lies some ten miles south of Sydney, New South Wales.—K. A. HINDWOOD, Sydney, N.S.W., 1/10/54.

Recent Records of the Hoary-headed Grebe for Sydney.— Previous to 1954 I identified the Hoary-headed Grebe (*Podiceps poliocephalus*) with certainty in the Sydney district on one occasion only—one bird on a lower stretch of Cook's River on October 2, 1943. It was in apparent breeding plumage as the head markings were very noticeable. On various other occasions I have observed pale-coloured birds that could refer to *P. poliocephalus* in eclipse plumage but more likely to be immature Little Grebes (*P. ruficollis*), a common Sydney species.

In view of the apparent rareness of the Hoary-headed Grebe near Sydney the occurrence of many small parties on the Hunter River swamps (*Emu*, vol. 51, p. 146), where they nested, was interesting. In 1953, S. G. Lane reported a few birds in the Hawkesbury district, and on April 19, 1954, Messrs. K. A. Hindwood, E. Hoskin and Lane saw a bird in adult plumage, associated with numerous Little Grebes, at Pitt Town Lagoon.

Since that date I have found the species present at three Sydney suburban localities, as follows—

Iron Cove, a backwater of Sydney Harbour, May 9. A compact flock of ten birds, all in excellent plumage, observed from the car on the marine scenic drive that skirts the Cove closely.

Eastlakes, a few miles south of Sydney, July 4. Two, associated with about thirty-five Little Grebes. One in semi-eclipse plumage and the other very pale, but associated closely with the other bird.

Millpond, a little south of Eastlakes, July 11. Two. One in good plumage, and the other in semi-eclipse.

In semi-eclipse plumage the head pattern was much duller but the lines across the head were still noticeable and the dark band on the back of head and nape prominent. In eclipse, no head-lines were seen, but the line from eye to bill, evident with immature Little Grebes, was absent.

Whether such a concentration of observations means that the species has been overlooked previously, or that an influx has occurred, I cannot say, but the latter possibility seems more likely.—A. R. MCGILL, Arneliffe, N.S.W., 18/7/54.

Annual Meeting, 1955

The Tasmanian Branch Secretary, Mr. Michael Sharland, advises that a programme is being arranged for the Annual Meeting to be held in Tasmania in October. It has been found impossible to hold the field outing at St. Helen's, as planned, so that will be arranged, now, for Port Arthur, Tasman Peninsula, from which centre excursions will take place. Dates for the tentative programme are:

Friday, October 14: Members arrive in Hobart. Accom-